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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 003378

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WHITE HOUSE FOR ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR HOMELAND SECURITY AND COUNTER-TERRORISM FRANCES FRAGOS TOWNSEND DEPARTMENT FOR PM A/S HILLEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2015

TAGS: PREL PTER IZ SY YM COUNTER TERRORISM

SUBJECT: SALEH TELLS GEN ABIZAID HE ACCEPTS WEAPONS INVENTORY SYSTEM; OFFERS MEDIATION WITH SYRIA AND IRAQI BAATHISTS

REF: SANAA 3349

Classified By: CDA NABEEL KHOURY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: In a November 26 meeting with visiting CENTCOM Commander GEN John Abizaid, President Saleh accepted long-standing U.S. offers to create a weapons inventory system for the Yemeni Armed Forces. He claimed that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had expressed willingness to cooperate with the USG on stopping the infiltration of fighters into Iraq, but needed more assistance from the United States. Saleh said he proposed direct contacts with the USG to Bashar, urging specifically a visit by GEN Abizaid to Damascus. On the subject of political reconciliation in Iraq, Saleh said only a "full dialogue" with all of Iraq's political actors, particularly "ordinary Baath party members," would help move the process forward. He offered to gather Baathists in Sanaa as a first step in that dialogue. The President asked GEN Abizaid for information on Yemeni detainees in Iraq, and lauded the new energy in Yemeni-Saudi counter-terrorism cooperation. He also urged the USG to support the new government in Somalia and requested financial assistance to retain Yemen's liaison officers in Tampa and Djibouti. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) In a cordial atmosphere punctuated by an unexpected invitation to lunch, President Saleh informed GEN Abizaid that he had decided to accept U.S. offers of assistance in creating a system to keep track of weapons procured for the Yemeni Armed Forces. Referring to previous conversations between Embassy's Office of Military Cooperation and the Minister of Defense, Saleh said that the system should cover "not one, but many units" (reftel). He emphasized, however, that the ROYG would look to the USG to provide funding for it. GEN Abizaid replied that keeping control of small arms/light weapons was important to improving the security not only of Yemen, but of the region, and that the USG would look for ways to support that common goal.

¶3. (S) Saleh told the General that he had sent a message to President Bashar "four or five days ago" recommending that Bashar support a visit by the CENTCOM Commander. Saleh claimed that Bashar was now ready to cooperate with the USG with regard to stopping the flow of fighters into Iraq, and had even begun building a barrier along the border, but would need more U.S. assistance to enhance his efforts. "We do not want to see a point of tension with Syria like in Iraq," Saleh advised. GEN Abizaid promised that he and Ambassador would convey to their superiors in Washington Saleh's concerns and his recommendation for a visit to Damascus by the General.

¶4. (C) The President praised CENTCOM's efforts to train, equip and enable Iraqi units to take the lead on more security operations, with support from coalition forces. Coalition forces, he said, should remain on their bases in Iraq and Iraqis should be responsible for providing security and taking the risks inherent in doing so. Saleh also hailed the news that all former Iraqi armed forces members below the rank of major would soon be allowed to re-join the military. GEN Abizaid said that was a decision that the Iraqi Minister of Defense had recently announced, and that the USG supports, but that would not be implemented until after the December 15 elections and the formation of a new government.

¶5. (C) Saleh advised the General that only a "full dialogue" with all of Iraq's political forces, particularly "ordinary members" of the Baath party, would help bring peace to the country. He offered to "use our ties" with the Baathists to bring a number of them to Sanaa for the first step in this dialogue. Saleh named former Prime Minister Ayad Alawi as a natural leader to conduct the dialogue, but cautioned that Alawi will not do it unless he has permission from Washington. "Power in Iraq is not with Zarqawi," Saleh advised, "but with the Baathists."

¶6. (C) GEN Abizaid agreed that the terrorists were rapidly losing support from the Iraqi population, and said the USG was interested in maintaining a dialogue with anyone except for al-Qaida and its associates. It was somewhat difficult,

however, to find political leaders willing to participate in a dialogue. He said that "many things that were not possible before will be possible" after the December elections, and added that a national dialogue of the type Saleh was suggesting would be in the best interests of all Iraqis at that time.

17. (S) Turning to other issues, Saleh asked the General to provide as much information as possible on Yemeni detainees in Iraq, but declined the General's offer for ROYG security officials to visit the detainees. With more information -- particularly the detainees' names -- he said, ROYG authorities would be able to obtain more information from their families on the detainees and their associates still in Yemen. Saleh said the ROYG collected what information it could from telephone monitoring, for example on the recent killing of six Yemenis in Iraq, but information gathered through these methods came all too often after an incident had occurred. GEN Abizaid promised to provide what information he could on the detainees as soon as possible.

18. (C) Asked about Yemen's cooperation with Saudi Arabia on counter-terrorism, Saleh said it was "excellent now." He said the ROYG had passed information recently to the Saudis that was critical in foiling planned attacks in Mecca and Medina. Such cooperation is good "not only for the Saudis' sake," he said, "but for regional security." He said he was particularly impressed with the level of cooperation his officials were receiving from Saudi Assistant Minister of Interior Mohammed bin Naif. Saleh said he had also met with the newly named Ambassador to the United States, Turki al-Faisal, and was "impressed." Saleh asked for the USG to use its influence with Saudi Arabia, and indeed with other Gulf countries, to invest in Yemen and help alleviate the poverty that drives youth to extremism.

19. (C) Saleh also said increased regional cooperation with the United States and Ethiopia was critical to bringing stability to Somalia. The three countries should do all they can to support the Yusufi government so that it can take action against terrorist elements. He said that Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki did not like the Yusufi government, and was "supporting any elements against it, including terrorists and insane people." GEN Abizaid agreed that the United States and Yemen needed to increase their cooperation to deny terrorists a safehaven anywhere, whether in Somalia, Yemen or Iraq.

10. (C) Reiterating points made in an earlier meeting with the Minister of Defense, Saleh asked GEN Abizaid for support in providing health insurance and billeting to Yemen's liaison officers at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa and at the CJTF-HOA headquarters in Djibouti. The General said he would ask his staff to research what support CENTCOM could provide to Yemen, because it is important to maintain Yemen's liaison officers at these locations.

11. (S) COMMENT: Saleh's report of improved CT cooperation with the Saudis confirms what we have heard elsewhere and provides a useful foundation for exploring opportunities for the USG to help in that regard. His offers to mediate with Bashar and Iraqi Baathists are well-meaning, but probably not particularly useful right now in light of the pressure the international community is exerting on Bashar to cooperate with the UN investigation, and the internal political dynamics in Iraq. We are very encouraged by the fact that Saleh has at last given the political green light needed to begin the implementation of a nationwide weapons inventory system. As the President made clear, however, he is expecting the USG's financial and technical support for the creation of a system that we have been strongly advocating for some time.

12. (U) GEN Abizaid has cleared this cable.
KHOURY